

A History of
**The Board of Health and
Railroad Commission Offices**
SI32



By Valerie R. Marvin

Michigan State Capitol Historian & Curator





Michigan's present Capitol, the state's third, opened on January 1, 1879, to great acclaim.
Image Courtesy of the Archives of Michigan

The Golden Age of Capitol Construction

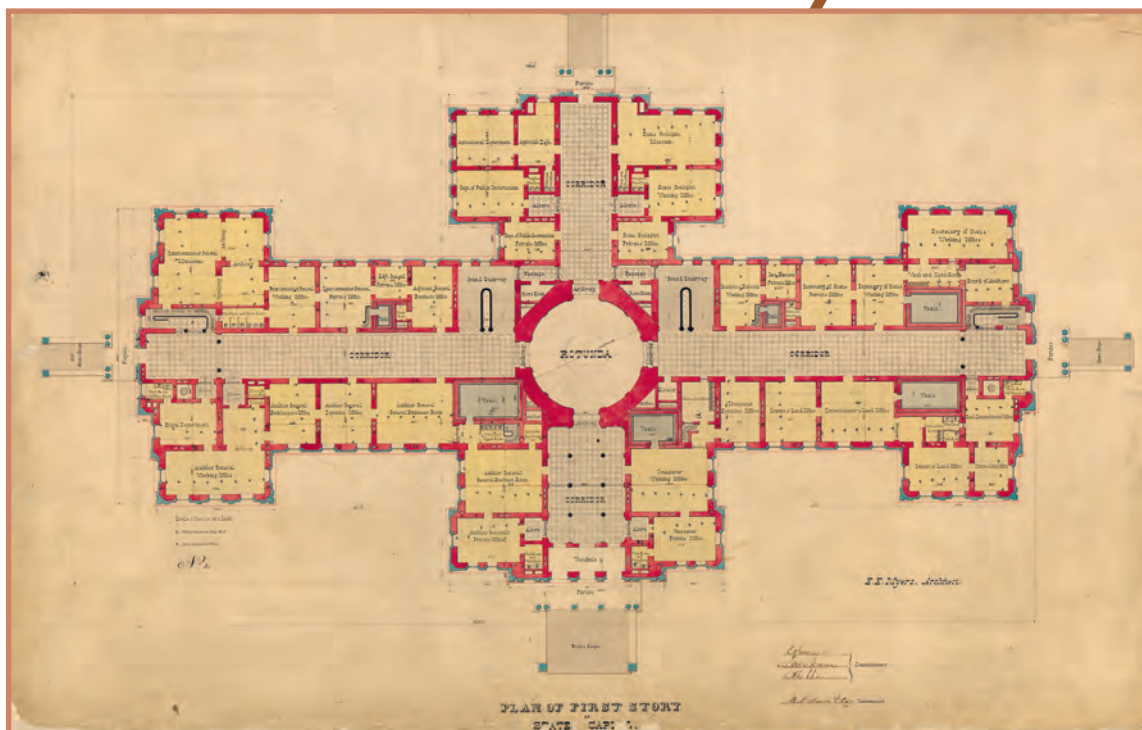
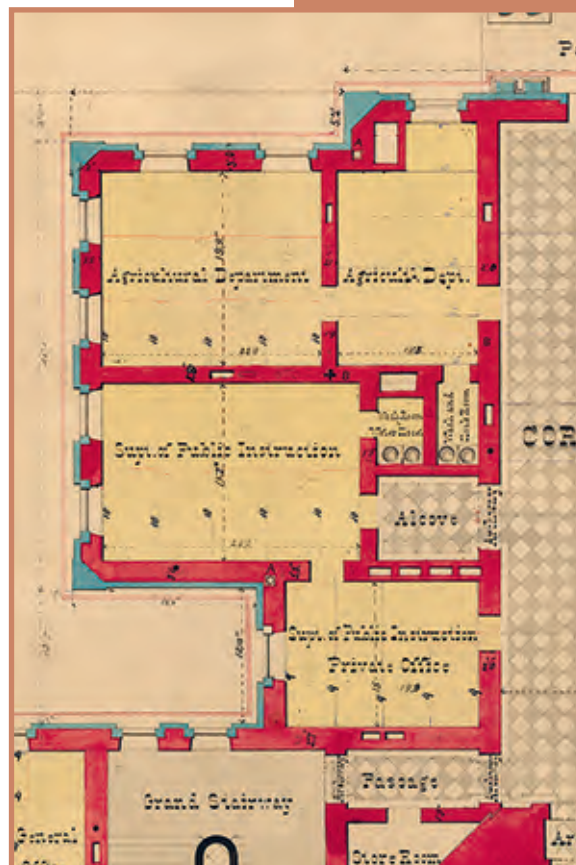
The Michigan State Capitol was built during the golden age of Capitol construction in the years following the American Civil War. From its inception, the building was designed to serve several functions and roles for the state. First, and most importantly, it is the official seat of government for the State of Michigan. It is a public forum where people can express their opinions, and a symbol of governmental traditions and the state itself. Yet the Capitol is also, at its very essence, an office building, where the day-to-day functions of government have played out for well over a century.

When the Capitol first opened in 1879, it was state government's only active office building, where all three branches of government were housed. The executive branch, including the Governor, State Treasurer, Secretary of State, State Librarian, Auditor General, the Superintendent of Public Instruction, and the Adjutant General, claimed most of the offices within it. The judicial branch was represented by the Supreme Court, which occupied offices and an elegant chamber in the east wing of the third floor. The legislative branch used the House and Senate Chambers, the largest and most impressive rooms in the Capitol, as well as offices for the Secretary of the Senate, the Clerk of the House, and a few committee rooms. There were no offices for individual legislators, who, when in Lansing for brief part-time legislative sessions, worked from their desks on the chamber floors.

The Board of Health and the Railroad Commission

The initial tenants of the modern office known as S132 are surprisingly difficult to identify, as various historical sources suggest a variety of schemes for the first floor's west wing. Architect Elijah E. Myers's original floor plans assigned the spaces on the wing's south side to the Superintendent of Public Instruction (in the easternmost two rooms, including the space now occupied by the west fire stairs) and the Agriculture Department (located in the two westernmost rooms). However, a newspaper reporter's description of the new building in early January 1879 casts doubt that this plan was actually carried to fruition. "The board of health, the commissioner of railroads, and the superintendent of public instruction have the west corridor . . . we find on the right (of the west corridor) the quarters of the state geologist." The reporter goes on to note that the State Board of Agriculture occupied rooms on the ground floor.¹

In late 1878 or early 1879, A.L. Bours, the outgoing Secretary for the Capitol Board of Commissioners and the new Superintendent of State Property, penned a directory for the new Capitol building in which he lists the offices located in each wing. In it, Bours writes that the west wing of the Capitol's first floor was home to the offices of the Board of Health, the Commissioner of Railroads, and the Superintendent of Public Instruction. He places the first two entities on the left of the hall, which most likely means that they were on the south side. The Superintendent of Public Instruction had his offices on the right side, which equates to the north side of the hallway.



The Capitol's original hand inked floor plans still survive in the Archives of Michigan. The first floor plan included suggested locations for each departmental office—some of which were ultimately changed.

Image Courtesy of the Archives of Michigan

Michigan State Capitol Directory.

LEFT.	CENTRE.	RIGHT.
First Floor.		
Auditor General.	EAST CORRIDOR.	State Treasurer.
Board of Health.	WEST CORRIDOR.	Superintendent of
Commissioner of Railroads.		Public Instruction.
Auditor General	SOUTH CORRIDOR.	Inspector General.
(Tax Department).		Adjutant General.
Commissioner of Insurance.		Quartermaster General.
Supt of State Property.		
	NORTH CORRIDOR.	
Board of Auditors.		Deputy Treasurer.
Secretary of State.		Land Office.
		Swamp Land Office.
Second Floor.		
Post Office.	EAST CORRIDOR.	Governor.
	Private Secretary.	
	WEST CORRIDOR.	
	State Library.	
	SOUTH CORRIDOR.	
	Senate Chamber.	
	NORTH CORRIDOR.	
	Representative Hall.	
Third Floor.		
Attorney Gen'l.	EAST CORRIDOR.	Supreme Court.
	Justices' Rooms.	
Attorneys' Consultation Room.	WEST CORRIDOR.	Attorneys' Consultation Room.
	Law Library.	
	SOUTH CORRIDOR.	
Clerk of Supreme Court.		
	Senate Gallery.	
	NORTH CORRIDOR.	
	Representative Hall Gallery.	
Fourth Floor.		
Pioneers' Audiance Room.	EAST CORRIDOR.	Pioneers' Office
Reporter Supreme Court.		
	WEST CORRIDOR.	
	Library.	
Basement.		
Board of State Charities.	EAST CORRIDOR.	Auditor's Working Rooms.
Auditor's Working Rooms.	SOUTH CORRIDOR.	State Armory
Pomological Society.		and
State Board of Agriculture.		Military Store Rooms.
With Compliments of A. L. Bours, Superintendent of State Property.		

Like the rest of the Capitol, these suites were designed to be both functional and beautiful, as befitted a growing and prosperous state. "The offices throughout are elegantly fitted up," a reporter wrote following his visit on January 1, 1879, for the Capitol's official dedication. "All of the doors are massive in finish, and fitted with locks specially made to order and being on bronze hinges, and bearing the arms of the state."² Passing through the main doorway, visitors stepped onto a colorful Brussels wool wall-to-wall carpet, laid in strips and carefully sewn together by hand. Sturdy and tasteful polished walnut desks, chairs, tables, and bookcases stood at attention, ready for use. Tall windows, framed by crisp wooden pocket shutters, ushered in natural light, while elegant new gas chandeliers, purchased from the Mitchell Vance Company in New York, gleamed overhead.

Early Changes

As might be expected, changes to these offices, and the rest of the Capitol, were constant. Two major improvements were launched in the 1880s, only a few years after the building opened. First, starting in 1885, electricians began wiring the Capitol for a new technology, electric lights. Prior to this, the Capitol was lighted entirely by gas fixtures. That same year, painters began to decorate the Capitol's plain white plaster walls with an array of rich colors and ornate designs. Slowly, every room, including the offices of the Commissioner of Railroads and the Board of Health, were transformed by artists who stenciled, grained, marbled, and striped beautiful motifs on the walls and ceilings.

In 1892, the Board of State Auditors directed the Superintendent of the Capitol to survey the building and its contents. He recorded his findings in their annual bound report, which survives to this day. The completed inventory (which moves through the building in geographic fashion) tracks nicely with Bours's directory, noting that the Board of Health had two rooms, identified

This early Capitol Directory survives in the Jenison Collection, a series of six scrapbooks compiled to record the Capitol's 1872-1878 construction by historian and collector O.A. Jenison.

Image Courtesy of the Archives of Michigan

The offices throughout are elegantly fitted up . . .

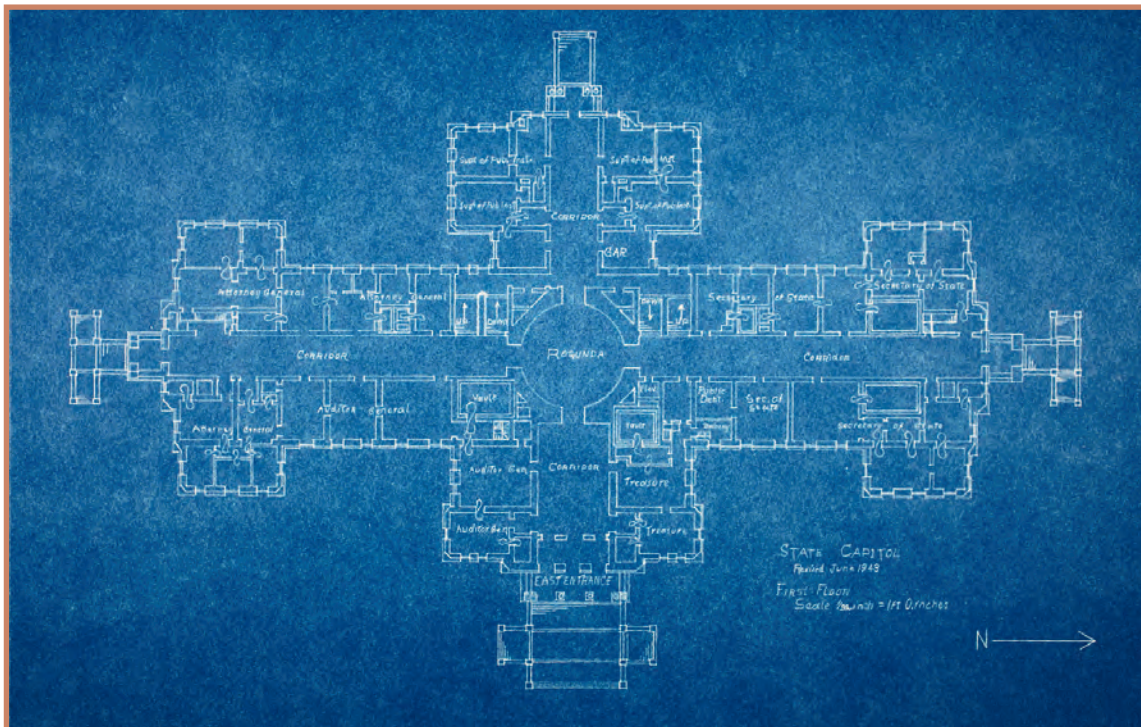
In 1893, Superintendent of Public Instruction Henry Pattengill and his staff posed for a photograph in the room known today as H153. This rare photo offers a tantalizing glimpse inside a Capitol office trimmed with elaborate carpeting, an original chandelier, decoratively painted walls, and leather and walnut furnishings.

Image Courtesy of the Archives of Michigan



as a clerk's room and a secretary's office. The Commissioner of Railroads suite next door included a private office, a south room, a hall, and closet. Like most of the other rooms in the Capitol, these spaces generally contained desks, bookcases, stepladders, office chairs, waste baskets, umbrella stands, and cuspidors—otherwise known as spittoons.³

Over the years, a significant number of commission members and their staff worked in these offices. At some point in the early twentieth century (no later than 1922), both entities relocated from their historic Capitol suites into other offices. Around this time, the Superintendent of Public Instruction, the longtime tenant across the hall, assumed these rooms, thereby doubling his workspace.



By the 1940s, space in the increasingly crowded Capitol was at a premium. Only the largest, most powerful departments retained their Capitol suites, while smaller divisions used rooms in the State Office Building, or in rented quarters downtown.

Image Courtesy of the
Archives of Michigan

The Mid-Twentieth Century

The next time the office appeared in the known historical record was in 1941, when the State Treasurer's office surveyed the Capitol and inventoried the number of people, pieces of furniture, and machines in the building. The accompanying floor plan shows that the Superintendent of Public Instruction's full holdings encompassed a total of five rooms located on both sides of the hall. The first floor offices were numbered 122, 123, 123A, 124, 124A, 125, and 126A. Additional staff worked in five more rooms on the ground floor.⁴

A rare mid twentieth century photograph showing several female—and one male – clerks at work in the Superintendent's first floor office.

Image Courtesy of the Archives of Michigan



The accompanying 1941 first floor index indicates that the size of the Superintendent's staff had dramatically expanded. Thirty people now worked in the first floor suite, in which they used thirty-two desks, four tables, thirty-five files, and, unlike their colleagues in other offices, zero machines. Four of the rooms were used by clerical workers, whereas the fifth room, number 122, remained a private office.⁵ An additional twenty-four workers staffed the ground floor rooms, where they carried out clerical work and maintained a small library.

Two years later Treasury repeated the exercise. This time they included not only the number of people, pieces of furniture, and machines housed in each office in 1943, but also in 1940. When compared with the numbers from 1941, they show an office in flux, due in part, perhaps, to the heavy demands of the war. The 1943 survey counted thirty-four people working in the first floor suite, whereas the size of the staff in 1940 totaled thirty-six—a higher count than either of the subsequent numbers. As might be expected, the numbers of desks and tables fluctuated slightly, while the total of files continued to grow. It's also interesting to note that by 1943 the Superintendent's first floor staff now had the use of one machine.⁶

A third known set of mid-twentieth century Capitol drawings was prepared by architect George R. Page in 1957 for the Buildings and Construction Division of the Michigan State Administrative Board. Page's drawings indicate that the Superintendent of Public Instruction's staff continued to occupy the same first floor rooms as in the previous decade. These rooms now bore new identifiers, with the rooms on the north side of the hallway marked 115 and 116, and the south side rooms marked 117, 117A, 117B, 117C, 118, 119, and 119A. Interestingly, Page noted that several of the rooms in the south suite included mezzanines, or half-floors, another symptom of the Capitol's increasingly overcrowded conditions.

Page's plans also shed additional light on the Superintendent's ground floor offices, which now included some (though not all) of the rooms on both the north and south sides of the west corridor.

During this period, the following Superintendents of Public Instruction worked in the first floor office.⁷

1919-1926	Thomas E. Johnson	1949-1953	Lee M. Thurston
1926-1927	Wilford L. Coffey	1953-1957	Clair L. Taylor
1927-1933	Webster H. Pearce	1957-1965	Lynn M. Bartlett
1933-1935	Paul F. Voelker	1966-1969	Ira Polley
1935-1948	Eugene B. Elliott		

The Legislature Moves In

The late 1960s and early 1970s were times of great change in the Capitol building. After ninety years of shuffling, squeezing, and relocating, the decision was made to dramatically remodel many of the offices in the Capitol. The action was motivated by a number of factors, including the state's move to a full-time legislature. This had dramatic repercussions for the Capitol building, where the pace of business in both House and Senate spaces increased significantly. As the number of legislators spending every week in Lansing rose, the call for additional office space reached a fever pitch. In order to accommodate all of these members, space had to be found—preferably in the Capitol. Governor Romney's preferred solution called for the construction of a new Capitol. While significant steps were taken towards this ambitious goal, ultimately the project was tabled over cost and aesthetic concerns.



Several of the plans considered for the new Capitol in the 1960s contained three buildings—designed to house and symbolize the three branches of government—and a central pylon.

Image Courtesy of the Michigan State Capitol Collection

When it became clear that a new Capitol was not to be, another solution was proposed. Why not reconfigure the Capitol's offices and committee rooms? The timing seemed ideal, as several of the building's longtime departmental offices, including the Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction, were moving out of the Capitol and into other buildings in downtown Lansing.⁸

A scheme was developed to capture new space in the old building by subdividing the rooms in half to create two ten-foot tall offices, one above the other, as had already happened in some of the rooms in this suite. From 1969 to 1972, almost every office on the Capitol's first, second, and third floors received an overfloor (sometimes called half floors, or mezzanines). At the same time, offices were modernized by adding drop ceilings, fluorescent lighting, and institutional carpeting and furnishings. Original decorative paint had already been covered by layers of overpaint, paneling, and wallpaper. Almost every vestige of the Capitol's original elegance and character had disappeared.

Offices, corridors, and even the lobby into the House Chamber, seen here, were sliced in half horizontally to create additional office space in the late 1960s and early 1970s.

Image Courtesy of the Michigan State Capitol Collection



From 1969 to 1972, almost every office on the Capitol's first, second, and third floors received an overfloor.

Office Occupants

By the publication of the 1973-74 *Michigan Legislative Handbook*, this suite of rooms was being used as House member offices. A survey of the handbooks indicates that the following members and one committee worked in this space over the years.

Please note that the district numbers in the table reflect those in use at the time each respective handbook was printed.⁹

1973-1974	Rep. William R. Copeland	27th District	Wyandotte	Rm. 117
	Rep. Bert C. Brennan	100th District	Saginaw	Rm. 117 ½
	Rep. Frederick L. Stackable	58th District	Lansing	Rm. 117 ½
	Rep. Douglas R. Trezise	87th District	Owosso	Rm. 117 ½
	Rep. James Farnsworth	54th District	Holland	Rm. 118
	Appropriations Committee			Rm. 118 & 119
1975-1976	Rep. Dennis M. Dutko	25th District	Warren	Rm. 117½A
	Rep. Jack E. Legel	2nd District	Detroit	Rm. 117½B
	Rep. Donald J. Albosta	86th District	St. Charles	Rm. 117½C
	Appropriations Committee			Rm. 118
	Appropriations Committee Clerk		Rm. 119	
1977-1978	Rep. Michael J. Bennane	1st District	Detroit	Rm. 117½A
	Rep. David H. Evans	75th District	Mt. Clemens	Rm. 117½B
	Rep. James A. Barcia	101st District	Bay City	Rm. 117½C
	Appropriations Committee			Rm. 118
	Appropriations Committee Clerk		Rm. 119	
1979-1980	Rep. Michael J. Bennane	1st District	Detroit	Rm. 117½
	Rep. Jeff Dongvillo	78th District	Scottsville	Rm. 117½A
	Appropriations Committee			Rm. 118
1981-1982	Rep. Michael J. Bennane	1st District	Detroit	Rm. 117½
	Rep. Curtis A. Hertel	12th District	Detroit	Rm. 117½
	Appropriations Committee			Rm. 118
1983-1984	Rep. Justine Barns	38th District	Westland	Rm. 117½A
	Rep. Michael J. Bennane	1st District	Detroit	Rm. 117½B
	Appropriations Committee			Rm. 118
1985-1986	Rep. Glenn Oxender	42nd District	Sturgis	Rm. 117
	Rep. Joseph Palamara	30th District	Wyandotte	Rm. 117½
	Rep. Michael J. Bennane	1st District	Detroit	Rm. 117½B
	Rep. Gordon Sparks	63rd District	Troy	Rm. 118
	Rep. Michael E. Nye	41st District	Litchfield	Rm. 119
	Rep. Timothy L. Walberg	40th District	Tipton	Rm. 119
	Rep. Thomas G. Power	104th District	Traverse City	Rm. 119½
1987-1988	Rep. Glenn Oxender	42nd District	Sturgis	Rm. 117
	Rep. Michael J. Bennane	1st District	Detroit	Rm. 117½
	Rep. Joseph Palamara	30th District	Wyandotte	Rm. 117½
	Rep. Willis C. Bullard Jr.	60th District	Milford	Rm. 118
	Rep. Gordon Sparks	63rd District	Troy	Rm. 118
	Rep. Michael E. Nye	41st District	Litchfield	Rm. 119
	Rep. Timothy L. Walberg	40th District	Tipton	Rm. 119
	Rep. Thomas G. Power	104th District	Traverse City	Rm. 119½
1989-1990	Rep. Glenn Oxender	42nd District	Sturgis	Rm. 117
	Rep. Michael J. Bennane	1st District	Detroit	Rm. 117½
	Rep. Joseph Palamara	30th District	Wyandotte	Rm. 117½
	Rep. Willis C. Bullard, Jr.	60th District	Milford	Rm. 118
	Rep. Gordon Sparks	63rd District	Troy	Rm. 118
	Rep. Michael E. Nye	41st District	Litchfield	Rm. 119
	Rep. Timothy L. Walberg	40th District	Tipton	Rm. 119
	Rep. Thomas G. Power	104th District	Traverse City	Rm. 119½

1991-1992 *The office is not listed in the 1991-92 Legislative Handbook and Directory, as the offices were then undergoing restoration.*

The Capitol's Restoration

In 1987, the Michigan Senate and the House of Representatives began the process of restoring Michigan's Capitol. Chief among their goals was to return the building to its original Victorian grandeur while modernizing the many outdated systems within it. They sought to make the Capitol a living, working museum, where the functions of government would continue to play out in a beautiful and inspiring historical setting. In order to carry out this mission, the restoration team, made up of supportive elected officials, architects, craftspeople, and artists, would need to touch every single space in the Capitol, including this suite.



Workers filled the top of the brick floor arches with litecrete. Once this cured, computer flooring, with built-in cavities for running wires, was placed on top and in turn covered with padding and carpet.

Image Courtesy of the Michigan State Capitol Collection

Changes came swiftly. Overfloors and suspended ceilings were removed, returning the height of the rooms to their full twenty-two feet. Tradespeople rerouted and disguised ductwork, wiring, and sprinkler heads. Appropriate carpeting, designed using colors and patterns from the Victorian era, and period inspired furnishings, were crafted and installed. Skilled designers and craftspeople used photographs to recreate original gas lighting fixtures removed in the early twentieth century. New windows, neatly trimmed with appropriate wood shutters and draperies, replaced old.

Of particular importance to the restoration was the recreation of the Capitol's historic decorative artwork. Michigan's Capitol contains approximately nine acres of hand painted art. A variety of techniques were used in the building when it was decorated in the 1880s, including stenciling, striping, marbling, and gilding. Over the years, the artwork was painted over many times as styles changed. For the first time, careful research was undertaken to determine the original colors and decorative paint motifs found in these rooms. These colors and motifs were then replicated by talented decorative artists who used traditional techniques to return the room to a proper late nineteenth century appearance.

One of the techniques used in this space is that of wood graining. The original Capitol building commissioners made the decision to use white pine as the dominant wood throughout the building. White pine was relatively inexpensive and available in abundance in this period. They did not intend, however, for people to recognize the wood as pine. Once the pine was installed, it was woodgrained—that is, painted carefully to mimic a more



The Capitol's traditional woodgraining recipe calls for oil paints, umber pigment, and stale beer, which serves as the binder.

Image Courtesy of the Michigan State Capitol Collection

expensive wood—by talented artists. In the Capitol, painters transformed yards of humble pine by painting it with the grain of walnut, the most fashionable (and therefore rather expensive) choice of the 1870s. The technique that they used was replicated by modern decorative painters during the restoration. They labored many hours to apply the necessary seven layers of paint needed to mimic the late nineteenth century process.

The restoration also brought with it changes to the easternmost room of this suite. Until then, the Capitol had relied on unsightly and dangerous exterior fire escapes attached to the exterior stonework. One of the goals of the restoration was to increase safety systems in the Capitol. This included installing interior fire stairs for the first time, which was an engineering nightmare. The Capitol's preservation architect eventually made the decision to remove a series of stacked rooms in the west wing where a new, enclosed fire escape could be built, thereby improving both the safety and the aesthetic of the building.

The restoration of the Capitol was completed in the fall of 1992. Rededication ceremonies held on November 19 and 20 of that year celebrated the success of the project, which won many significant state and national preservation awards. That same fall, the building was officially designated a National Historic Landmark, the highest honor accorded historic structures in America.

Post Restoration Use

The completion of the Capitol's restoration brought with it the need to resolve matters concerning the identification and future use of the Capitol's rooms, including this suite, which now serves as Senate office space. (No committees have met in this area since the restoration.) A new numbering system, devised by Capitol Preservation Architect Richard C. Frank, was introduced indicating the ownership of the space (House, Senate, Executive, etc.) and the room's number. Today this suite is numbered S132, S132A, S132B, S134, and S134A.

The following members have served in this suite since the Capitol's restoration.¹⁰

1993-1994	Sen. Phillip Arthurhultz	33rd District	Whitehall	Rm. S132
1995-1996	Sen. Doug Carl	12th District	Macomb	Rm. S132
1997-1998	Sen. William Van Regenmorter	22nd District		Rm. S132
1999-2000	Sen. William Van Regenmorter	22nd District		Rm. S132
2001-2002	Sen. William Van Regenmorter	22nd District		Rm. S132
2003-2004	Sen. Valde Garcia	22nd District		Rm. S132
2005-2006	Sen. Valde Garcia	22nd District		Rm. S132
2007-2008	Sen. Valde Garcia	22nd District		Rm. S132
2009-2010	Sen. Valde Garcia	22nd District		Rm. S132
2011-2012	Sen. Mike Nofs	19th District	Battle Creek	Rm. S132
2013-2014	Sen. Mike Nofs	19th District	Battle Creek	Rm. S132
2015-2016	Sen. Mike Nofs	19th District	Battle Creek	Rm. S132
2017-2018	Sen. Mike Nofs	19th District	Battle Creek	Rm. S132
2019-2020	Sen. Peter MacGregor	28th District	Rockford	Rm. S132



End Notes

- 1 *The Evening News*, January 2, 1879.
- 2 *The Evening News*, January 2, 1879.
- 3 *Annual Report of the Board of State Auditors for the State of Michigan for the Year 1892*. Robert Smith & Co. State Printers and Binders, 1892, p. 516-517.
- 4 State of Michigan, Department of Treasury. “Capitol Space and Contents Survey,” 1941.
- 5 Ibid.
- 6 State of Michigan, Department of Treasury. “Capitol Space and Contents Survey,” 1943.
- 7 *Michigan Manual 1963-1964*, p. 88.
- 8 The Superintendent of Public Instruction had moved to the Prudden Building by the printing of the 1965-66 *Michigan Manual*.
- 9 *Michigan Legislative Handbooks*, 1973-1990.
- 10 *Michigan Legislative Handbooks*, 1993-2020.



Capitol.Michigan.gov